



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

REPORT

# Local authorities' and regional consortia's support for schools and PRUs in response to Covid-19: government response

Our response to Estyn's report and recommendations on local authority and regional consortia's support for schools and PRUs in response to Covid-19.

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Estyn thematic review of Local Authorities' and Regional Consortia's support for schools and PRUs in response to Covid-19.

## Report details

Review of Local Authorities' (LAs')/ regional consortia's approaches to promote learning and support vulnerable learners during the June to November 2020 period.

The key findings of the report indicate that:

- LAs and consortia have worked closely together and with Welsh Government to respond to the pandemic
- LAs provided valuable support to enable their schools and PRUs to re-open successfully to all pupils in September. Where effective joint working across services was in place, they were quick to respond to support pupils' wellbeing, particularly vulnerable learners. Where collaboration is less well established, the pandemic has strengthened joint working. The enhanced use of digital communication contributed to more efficient multi-agency working
- provision for distance learning improved through the summer term. As the

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need continued in the autumn term, it was a priority to further improve and embed distance and blended learning provision. Whilst consortia and LAs have developed helpful guidance, good practice and a range of professional learning, schools', LAs' and consortia's oversight of the quality of provision is underdeveloped

- pupils' learning experiences in the autumn varied widely across and within schools. This has resulted in unequal learning experiences for pupils who have received most of their education in school and those who have been taught at a distance for extended periods
- the barriers to learning at home identified in the summer term, where a minority of learners were disadvantaged by lack of access to suitable IT or adequate connectivity remained in the autumn term
- the pandemic has had a greater impact on certain groups of pupils, (e.g. those eligible for free school meals). This has exacerbated some challenges that LAs and consortia had been working with schools to address
- LAs and consortia have recognised the potential longer term impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing of learners and have offered professional learning for school staff on supporting wellbeing. Learners already challenged because of adverse childhood experiences prior to the pandemic have faced further challenges
- in most cases, LAs have ensured that statutory processes for pupils in relation to SEN have continued during the autumn term
- consortia and LA officers continued to support teachers' and school leaders' digital competence during the autumn term. Effective use of digital communication has been positive for facilitating more efficient and frequent interactions between and within learning communities.
- school leaders across Wales have mixed views about the effectiveness of support they have received from their local authority and their regional school improvement consortium during the pandemic
- LAs made appropriate early adaptations to their governance arrangements but a few were too slow in resuming their scrutiny functions. By the middle of July 2020, this had improved and by the autumn, all council Cabinets were meeting online, as were scrutiny committees in most councils.

## Welsh Government response

We will work with Estyn, local authorities and regional consortia to ensure that the lessons learned from the report are implemented. The key structures for leading our recovery response are our Strategic Education Partnership, the Change Board and the Operational Delivery Board. These three groups are already well-established and encompass all of the key parties that will contribute to the delivery of 'our national mission' and our recovery from COVID. Our priority now is to work with our partners to develop an agreed, long term, deliverable programme to support learners over the coming years to achieve their potential.

The following are individual responses to each of the recommendations:

### **R1: urgently address barriers to learning at home, particularly where this is due to a lack of access to suitable computers or adequate connectivity**

- We recognise the challenge facing all learners, teachers and leaders as a result of the pandemic, and acknowledge that digital responses and solutions may not be as suitable for some as they are for others.
- We have created a Blended Learning Working Group, consisting of officers from Welsh Government, Local Authorities and the Regional Consortia, and tasked them with addressing issues of equity of access to learning in periods of disruption.
- The Working Group have identified five system level challenges, one of which specifically relates to equipment and connectivity for both learners and staff.
- Phase 1 of our digital baseline survey has now concluded, with submissions received from all 22 local authorities. The emerging findings confirm that there is a small number of additional digitally excluded learners have been identified since our original engagement at the outset of the pandemic.
- However, the vast majority of local authorities have confirmed that support has already been put in place in most cases.
- Schools in Wales remain well provisioned with access to digital services and

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infrastructure through the Hwb EdTech programme. Investment of over £80 million in the last 2 financial years alone has supported local authorities in upgrading and future-proofing in-school digital infrastructure.

- More than 130,000 end-user devices have been purchased through the Hwb EdTech programme to date. We have already seen the distribution of over 120,000 end-user devices to local authorities, with the remaining 12,000 ordered devices expected over the coming weeks. In addition, there have been 10,848 MiFi units deployed and 9,717 re-repurposed devices issued.
- There is ongoing work to support families who are struggling with connectivity issues. We have engaged with the four main mobile operators to expand the data limit increase offer to families in Wales and with digital infrastructure colleagues to support local authorities with the various options available.
- Usage of the Hwb platform has exploded since remote learning re-convened this term. Hwb is currently delivering a daily average of up to 50 logins a second, which provides learners and practitioners with access to our Hwb digital services including email and online learning tools. The platform itself is recording record logins of over 337,000, with over 1 million page views per day.

## **R2: improve the quality of the distance and blended learning experiences for pupils by supporting more effective teaching across and within schools and PRUs**

- We recognise that there were inconsistencies in the delivery of blended learning in the initial stages of the disruption. The regional consortia undertook a review of delivery and this informed the development of further more detailed guidance.
- Schools and practitioners have had to spend time learning about systems that weren't widely used by them before the pandemic, and have learned new skills and worked to make best use of available tools in HWB – from google classrooms, Microsoft teams, etc.
- More recent professional learning has focused on further enhancing these skills and technologies. Opportunities for additional support from the consortia in these areas have been well subscribed.
- More recently, we have received feedback that schools are now offering

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higher quality remote synchronous and asynchronous provision.

- To build on this momentum, work is well underway to support all practitioners to develop new skills in learning design. The pandemic has taught us that this will be a core tool in the future skillset of all practitioners.
- A series of recently developed learning design modules were launched on Hwb, focused on using effective classroom practice as the basis for creating asynchronous remote learning resources and experiences.
- Work is also ongoing with a range of partners as part of a virtual Wales Collaborative for Learning Design (WCLD), to embed learning design as a pedagogic discipline.
- We have refreshed our learning guidance to support schools and settings' priorities for learning at this time. The priorities within this guidance very much emphasise similar principles to those laid out by Estyn. In particular we are encouraging schools to emphasise:
  - ensuring learning has clear purpose and enables learners to progress
  - learners' health and well-being
  - literacy, numeracy and digital competence as enablers of a wider curriculum
  - broad and balanced learning that allows learners to develop a breadth of understanding and a range of knowledge and skills.
- We are working closely with Estyn and regional consortia to provide additional support to schools to prioritise learning around these key principles.

### **R3: develop a coherent approach to improve progress in literacy, numeracy and personal and social skills of vulnerable pupils disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example pupils eligible for free school meals**

- We recognise as a result of COVID-19 that some learners, including those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged may require additional support with their learning because of their experience during the pandemic. The published **Guidance for supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged learners** is intended to support schools and settings to ensure an inclusive approach for all learners, particularly benefitting our vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

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- These elements are extremely important to learners and are especially key for vulnerable learners disproportionately affected in our schools, as well as those attending pupil referral units.
- That is why literacy, numeracy and the social and emotional well-being of learners are at the centre of our refreshed learning guidance for schools. This recognises that these are enablers for learning, supporting learners' readiness to learn.
- These learners will also remain at the heart of our considerations as we look towards supporting learners and schools as the pandemic subsides.

#### **R4: establish strategies to monitor and address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the physical and mental health of pupils**

- Our Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing Framework guidance for schools will be published shortly and will be mandatory for maintained schools and local authorities.
- We are clear that the Framework is also central to our plans to tackle the long-term wellbeing impact of the pandemic by supporting learner wellbeing.
- Schools will be required to regularly review their wellbeing needs and put in place strategies to address issues and gaps and build on their strengths. Regular review will form part of the school improvement planning process.
- At the national level we have commissioned Cardiff University to undertake an evaluability assessment to consider the evidence to measure the success and progress of our whole school activity in both the short, medium and long-term. This will report later in 2021.

#### **R5: create opportunities to take stock and evaluate the impact of policies and practices developed since the start of the pandemic to inform future ways of working and curriculum design**

- As the Estyn report recognises, we are already working closely with them and regional consortia to understand the impact of policies and practice. In particular, over the coming weeks and months we will be seeking to give schools space to think and reflect on their approaches to understand what worked well and how to overcome the challenges ahead.

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- Welsh Government officials' weekly meetings with Estyn and regional consortia are focused on understanding their intelligence from conversations with schools and the impacts on learning. As the pandemic subsides, it will be critical to have that shared understanding of the challenges learners and schools face – and, importantly, on how they should be best supported as our schools move from recovery into reform.
- When the Our National Mission update was published in October 2020, it signalled the intention to develop an implementation plan. The Implementation Plan was published on 27 January setting out the approach to evaluation, including readiness and scoping work, to provide the framework through which we can take stock and better understand impacts.
- As part of our evaluation scoping study we will explore how best to support schools and practitioners as they work through the impacts of the pandemic and into curriculum reform. This will involve broad engagement with a representative sample of schools - ongoing engagement with key partners such as Estyn - as well as more detailed discussions with practitioners via the national network.
- The evaluation scoping study will also establish baselines that are cognisant of the effects of the pandemic, from which we can understand and demonstrate the impacts of policies and implementation activities.

## Publication details

The report was published on 15 January 2021 and is [available on Estyn's website](#).

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